

A news round up of the 2002 AIDS Conference in Barcelona

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By John McCaslin

Barcelona baggage

Exactly 236 bureaucrats from the Department of Health and Human Services, at a whopping cost of \$3.6 million, traveled to **Barcelona** in July to participate in a world **AIDS** conference.

That "across the Atlantic" journey now has several dozen lawmakers, many members of the Republican Study Committee, up in arms.

"The amount of financial support and the number of employees sent to attend to this single conference appears extremely excessive," says an Oct. 9 letter to HHS Secretary Tommy G. Thompson.

Saying the trip to Barcelona "begs scrutiny and oversight," the congressmen question whether the money might not have been better spent providing medicine to the hundreds of Americans with HIV who lack access to medical care.

San Francisco Chronicle

AUGUST 27, 2002

The summit isn't sustainable

By Debra J. Saunders

PRESIDENT Bush was right to skip the U.N. "Earth Summit" now convening in Johannesburg, and send a delegation headed by Secretary of State Colin Powell instead. It would have been an improvement to nix the delegation completely, but why give the Euros another excuse to sniff and moan about U.S. "unilateralism"?

U.N. conferences tend to be an exercise in diplomatic self-gratification as it is. This summit -- which nonsensically addresses poverty under the rubric of "sustainable development" -- is especially irrelevant. So you have the usual America-bashing and demands for more Western money, without the summit really taking on corrupt African policies that threaten to starve 13 million Africans.

The Bush administration wants to donate 500,000 tons of grain to fight African starvation. This is supposed to be a good thing. But Zambia and Zimbabwe have rejected humanitarian shipments of grain, and Mozambique has restrictions on them, because the grain was genetically modified.

"We would rather starve than get something toxic," Zambia President Levy Mwanawasa has proclaimed. Sure, something toxic like the same food Americans eat. Apparently, in the face of famine, he's afraid of obesity.

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe has been evicting and arresting white farmers -- blind to the damage he is inflicting on his famine-ravaged his people.

And where is the summit's focus? South African President Thabo Mbeki opened the conference with a rant against wealthy nations not sharing enough -- of what? The scorned grain? Mbeki called the division of wealth "global apartheid."

U.N. envoy Jan Pronk bemoaned the West's "inward-looking values" in not giving more to poor nations. Pronk was referring to wealthy nation's resistance of the Earth Summit push for wealthy nations to increase their foreign aid to poor countries from 0.2 percent of national income to 0.7 percent -- and it will never happen.

Now you tell me which activity would save more African lives: outraged denunciations of the famine-friendly policies of Zimbabwe, Zambia and Mozambique from their African neighbors? Or rants about why America should give three times as much aid to developing countries, including corrupt governments that act as if it's a favor to accept their food?

The whole setup stinks. By making poverty a function of "sustainable development," the United Nations guaranteed that the focus would be on getting Western nations to dole out more aid -- as opposed to shaming dysfunctional governments to be more democratic and less corrupt so that their people can live healthier lives.

Why would Americans go along with the summit agenda? Do the U.N. types believe that Americans don't think there are enough ingrates in the world? Or are Americans supposed to want more Third World countries to reject our food?

Bush would have to have been a masochist to show up in Johannesburg after what happened to Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson in Barcelona last month. At the 14th International AIDS conference there, critics drowned Thompson out, shouting "shame, shame" as he spoke.

Oh, yes, the shame. The United States has committed \$500 million to the U.N. Global Fund to Fight AIDS and another \$500 million to prevent mother-to-newborn transmission of AIDS in Africa and the Caribbean.

And apparently the U.N. folks simply haven't figured out that they can't guilt more money from the United States for sustainable development. Americans understand that no matter how much we give the rest of the world, we'll hear scolds like "shame, shame" far more than we'll ever hear "thank you."

Capital Times (Madison, WI)
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PROTESTERS BLOCK THOMPSON SPEECH

Shrieking protesters at the AIDS conference in Barcelona, Spain, drowned out U.S. health Secretary Tommy Thompson as he attempted to speak about American global AIDS programs today.

About 40 people who demanded more U.S. funding clambered onto the lecture platform as Thompson tried to address the 14th International AIDS Conference; some waved placards declaring "Wanted: Bush and Thompson for murder and neglect of people with AIDS."

As security officers protected the secretary, protesters shouting "Shame! Shame!" blocked him from view of the lecture audience and created such a din that he could not be heard.

Thompson then left the platform and held a news conference behind the auditorium.

Orlando Sentinel (Florida)
July 10, 2002

ACTIVISTS DISRUPT SESSION ON AIDS; IN BARCELONA, ACT UP MEMBERS SHOUTED AT TOMMY THOMPSON DURING HIS SPEECH.

By Thomas H. Maugh II, Foreign Correspondent

BARCELONA, Spain -- In a scene reminiscent of the early days of the AIDS epidemic, activists stormed the stage Tuesday and prevented U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson from delivering a scheduled speech here at the 14th International AIDS Conference.

Meanwhile, one of the great triumphs of the fight against AIDS was announced at the conference: Physicians have reduced the number of U.S. infants born with HIV infections by 80 percent since 1991.

Thompson later stoically delivered his 20-minute talk, but the only ones who heard it were the phalanx of security men who separated him from the demonstrators.

"We know what he is going to say, and we are tired of his lies," said Asia Russell of ACT UP, one of the organizers of the demonstration.

Italian activists later shut down a large booth run by U.S. drug company Gilead Sciences Inc., protesting that the company would communicate only with physicians in Italy.

Another group had shut down a booth run by Hoffmann-La Roche on Monday. The

activists are planning a protest against the Coca-Cola Co. today because the company, one of the largest employers in Africa, does not provide AIDS health care to all its employees.

Thompson had only gotten a few words out of his mouth when about 25 protesters broke into the room, blowing shrill whistles and shouting "Shame, shame!" Thompson stopped talking and, after about 15 minutes, the protesters left. But when he began speaking again, they returned, resuming their loud activities with an assist from some audience members.

The activists charge that the U.S. contribution to the new Global AIDS Fund, as well as to other international programs, is pitifully low. As a proportion of its gross national product, the U.S. contribution is even less than that of Uganda, one of the world's poorest countries, Russell charged.

The United States' 2001 budget for international HIV/AIDS efforts was \$726 million, while the proposed budget for next year is \$1.3 billion. UNAIDS, the United Nations' program on HIV/AIDS, projects that at least \$10 billion per year is necessary for AIDS programs but has so far received commitments for less than \$3 billion for this year.

On the AIDS fight front, about 1,760 HIV-positive infants were born in the United States in 1991, but only an estimated 280 to 370 in 2000, Dr. Patricia Fleming of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention told the 14th International AIDS Conference.

That reduction, attributed to widespread treatment of pregnant women with AIDS drugs, "clearly demonstrates remarkable progress," said Dr. Harold Jaffe, who heads the CDC's HIV prevention programs.

In general, only about 2 percent of infants born to HIV-positive women contract the virus if the mother is diagnosed before birth and receives a cocktail of anti-AIDS drugs. If the diagnosis is made only after birth, however, and the mother receives no therapy, the transmission rate rockets to 25 percent.

The number of infected babies is likely to grow in the future because of the rise in new infections among women. Fleming called for new prevention programs, noting that, "The simple fact is that the best way to prevent new infections in babies is to prevent infections in women."

Chicago Tribune
July 10, 2002 Wednesday

AIDS activists disrupt Thompson speech

By Laurie Garrett. Special to the Tribune. Laurie Garrett is a staff writer for Newsday, a Tribune newspaper

BARCELONA, Spain -- Shouting "Shame! Shame! Shame!," AIDS activists stormed the stage at the 14th International Conference on AIDS on Tuesday, drowning out U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson as he spoke about U.S. contributions to the global effort to stop AIDS.

"Let's hear about morality, Thompson," a demonstrator shouted. "People are dying because they don't have access to medications!"

About 40 activists blew whistles and shouted, first from the stage and then from the aisles, demanding that the United States play a bigger role in the global fight against AIDS. Asserting that wealthy nations are obliged to help poorer ones, the protesters criticized the level of U.S. contributions to the Global Fund for AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis and the high prices of U.S.-made anti-HIV drugs.

Leading economists and United Nations officials on Tuesday called upon the United States to immediately donate \$2 billion to \$3 billion to the fight and thereby set an example.

The anger and desperation have almost shoved science out of the picture at the meeting. The molecular biologists do not dominate discussion; the macroeconomists and social analysts do.

Worldwide, less than 2 percent of the HIV-infected population has access to the drug cocktails that have brought years of healthy life to Americans and Europeans, according to Monitoring the AIDS Pandemic, a Harvard University group.

The importance of drug therapy and what it could mean to infected people in poor nations was crystallized by World Bank economist Hans Binswanger, who is HIV-positive. Binswanger is on drug cocktails that keep him healthy.

He said he was challenged by a colleague from Malawi who asked: "You are well. Could you pay to save one person?"

So, Binswanger said, he took out a second mortgage on his home and subsidized an African child's care.

He said he soon realized that the need was in the millions of lives, not one, so he used his World Bank skills to track down potential contributors to help AIDS activists whose presence, he reasoned, is needed to keep pressure on their governments.

"I have traveled around the world for a year and a half looking for funds, and I haven't found any, ladies and gentlemen," Binswanger said. "Budgets are limited only when we are not willing to pay! So let's get real when we talk of cost-effectiveness. We are not willing to pay!"

That perception was at the core of protests directed against Thompson.

"We have to look at this as one world, one AIDS community," Lynda Dee of AIDS

Action Baltimore said.

In his speech, Thompson said that "no administration in any nation has ever made fighting HIV-AIDS as high a priority as the United States under [the Bush] administration."

Talking with reporters, he expressed exasperation over the criticism.

"People won't listen. People don't see all we're doing," he said.

Several U.S. AIDS activists met privately later with Thompson.

In an emotionally charged news conference, Dr. Peter Piot, director of UNAIDS; Richard Feacham, director of the Global Fund; Columbia University economist Jeffrey Sachs; and Stephen Lewis, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan's special envoy on HIV/AIDS in Africa, lambasted wealthy nations for failing to meet funding targets.

While the United States has committed more dollars than any other nation, Sachs shouted into a microphone that the U.S. economy constitutes 40 percent of the total gross national product of the wealthy world.

The United States needs to up the ante, he said, so Europe, Japan, Canada and other nations will follow.

During the demonstration against Thompson, former Health Secretary Louis Sullivan was in the front row. Sullivan was shouted off the stage when he addressed this gathering in San Francisco in 1990, speaking on behalf of the administration of Bush's father.

"This is ridiculous," he said amid the shouting. "Everybody has a right to protest, but nobody has a right to prevent someone from speaking. That is un-American."

The Augusta Chronicle (Georgia)
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EDITORIAL, Pg. A04
WRONG PROTEST TARGET

Protesters, most of them Americans, who shouted down U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson's speech at the AIDS conference in Barcelona, Spain, this week, disgraced their country while making utter fools of themselves.

"Shame! Shame! Shame!" the AIDS activists yelled as they stormed the stage where Thompson was speaking. They were referring to what they considered to be the United States' stingy funding contributions to the global fight against AIDS.

In reality, the shame was the demonstrators' -- not only because they drowned out Thompson's fundamental right to speak and the delegates' right to hear him, but also because they were wrong on the facts.

This nation is the world's most generous contributor in the battle to curb HIV/AIDS. Since 1986 the U.S. government has dedicated over \$1.6 billion for the prevention and mitigation of the epidemic in the developing world. That represents nearly 50 percent of all international HIV/AIDS funding. It also dwarfs the amount of what's spent on cancer, heart disease and other sicknesses.

To claim that the United States is shortchanging the AIDS battle is a lie. Our government, both under Presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, have been upping the anti-AIDS ante each year. Last year \$466 million was donated to the international effort. Next year it will be more, not including Bush's new \$500 million initiative to stifle the transmission of HIV from mother to child in Africa and the Caribbean.

No one argues that AIDS isn't a tragic epidemic, especially on the African continent where an estimated 25 million people are infected with the deadly virus. That's about 70 percent of the world's total infected people.

But there's only so much HIV/AIDS money those nations' can constructively use. The regimen of "cocktail" medications Western AIDS patients must take is much too complex for many Africans to understand.

Even the notion of using condoms for protection is alien to their cultures, but that must change if progress against AIDS is ever to be made in the developing world. The governments there must educate their citizenry about the fatal virus with the emphasis on changing behaviors.

The problem is many of those governments are corrupt and any money they receive from the West -- whether to fight AIDS or anything else -- goes into the pockets of crooked rulers and their cronies. These are the governments AIDS activists should be protesting, not the United States.